

University of Dundee

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Maycock, Matthew

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'I Do Not Appear to Have had Previous Letters'. The Potential and Pitfalls of Using a Qualitative Correspondence Method to Facilitate Insights Into Life in Prison During the Covid-19 Pandemic

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journals.sagepub.com/home/ijqMatthew Maycock¹

Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown represents a significant challenge for qualitative researchers due to social distancing measures restricting face-to-face data collection. At the time of ethical approval (early April 2020), all face-to-face research projects facilitated by the Scottish Prison Service and most prison jurisdictions were paused. In response to these methodological challenges, a participatory action correspondence methodology was designed in order for people in custody to influence the direction of this project by suggesting research questions and themes. This article analyses the potential of this approach, what this illuminated and critically engages with the challenges of implementing this qualitative methodology. Eight participants were selected due to previous participation in a Participatory Action Research project at one Scottish prison. After consent was given via post, eight letters were sent to the participants. This paper analyses the questions relating to, and aspects of Covid-19 that were important to the participants, in the hope that these insights will influence other qualitative research on the impacts of Covid-19 within prison settings. Methodologically and theoretically, this paper illustrates the potential and challenges relating to using a qualitative correspondence method to facilitate unique insights into life in custody during what emerges as a particularly challenging time in prison settings. More widely the paper reiterates and restates the importance of qualitative research methods as methods that provide unique and rich insights into the Covid-19 pandemic.

Keywords

Covid-19, prison, lockdown in prison, prisoner and staff relationships, Scottish Prison Service, correspondence methodology, qualitative prison research

Introduction

As a consequence of lockdown measures imposed during the Covid-19 pandemic, face-to-face data collection was largely paused or halted in most research contexts (Howlett, 2021; Jowett, 2020; Townsend et al., 2020; Tremblay et al., 2021). This resulted in a diverse set of responses by qualitative researchers and the utilisation of often novel approaches to data collection and fieldwork (Lupton, 2020). Qualitative researchers are often creative and flexible and have developed a wide range of novel approaches to undertaking qualitative research, although conducting qualitative research within secure settings such as prisons posed particular issues.

This article analyses the methodological challenges of undertaking qualitative research within prisons during the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown. Within this context, a novel project was developed that provides unique insights into the Covid-19 pandemic from the perspective of people in custody. No similar studies utilising this methodology have

¹University of Dundee, Dundee, UK

Corresponding Author:

Matthew Maycock, School of Education and Social Work, University of Dundee, Nethergate, Dundee, Scotland DD1 4HN, UK.

Email: Mmaycock001@dundee.ac.uk



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been undertaken in Scotland or published internationally. The paper explores the extent to which a specifically designed qualitative correspondence research methodology can provide a meaningful way for people in prison settings to share their experiences of the Covid-19 pandemic. The study used a correspondence (letter writing) method for data collection, with data subsequently analysed in Nvivo 12. Despite the particular meaning of letters within prison settings, correspondence methods are a relatively new type of data collection well suited to the context of the Covid-19 pandemic where face-to-face research was impossible in the Scottish and many other prison jurisdictions. The methodology developed within the context of the Covid-19 pandemic was one of the few means of facilitating qualitative research within the context of secure institutions, enabling often marginalised and forgotten research subjects to influence the increasingly substantial research agenda relating to Covid-19.

The findings of this study have been published elsewhere (Maycock, 2021; Maycock & Dickson, 2021), these focus on the reflections of people in custody about the ways in which the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown have been managed within a Scottish prison. Additionally, a more theoretical paper analyses the ways in which the Covid-19 lockdown increased feelings of isolation and the 'depth' of prison sentences for the participants in this study. At the time of submission, these are some of the few published qualitative studies of the impacts of Covid-19 pandemic within prison settings. The purpose of this paper is to critically reflect on the methodological implications of undertaking qualitative research within prisons during Covid-19. This was particularly challenging for the author as a consequence of having been undertaking qualitative research within prisons for a number of years prior to the Covid-19 lockdown.

Covid-19 in Prison Settings

The Covid-19 pandemic has been called the worst public health crisis for a generation (Gatera & Pavarini, 2020; Heymann & Shindo, 2020; Lai et al., 2020), which has resulted in a number of measures including social distancing and lockdown measures within prison settings. The literature on Covid-19 in prison settings is emerging at the time of writing, with new studies published all the time, although these tend to be quite limited (Johnson et al., 2021). The majority of the emerging literature on Covid-19 in prison settings is health focused (Kakimoto et al., 2020; Okano & Blower, 2020; Vose et al., 2020) and often focused on different protocols and precautions that can, should and have been utilised to minimise the transmission of the virus in the prison setting (Burki, 2020; de Carvalho et al., 2020; Jones & Tulloch, 2020; Montoya-Barthelemy et al., 2020; Solis et al., 2020; Vose et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2020). Robinson et al. (2020) have highlighted the impacts of digital inequalities in the face of Covid-19's outbreak, and prisoners and those held in detention centres, as they discuss, are at higher risk of experiencing the

impacts of these digital inequalities. Given the role that digital devices, particularly those with internet access, have played in security within prisons (ibid), giving prisoner direct access to this technology is not characteristic of the prison system. Beyond this, in the United States, for example, access to telephone and internet or visitation is often subject to cost and payment, which is not always affordable to all inmates (Wurcel et al., 2020). Furthermore, with prisoners often disproportionately representative of the most deprived in society, the families of these prisoners may not have access to the appropriate technology to enable them to utilise video or virtual visitation procedures; especially since facilities like libraries and internet cafes are also impacted by the outbreak of the virus, further limiting accessibility (Robinson et al., 2020). A recent scoping review of the mental health implications of the Covid-19 pandemic within prison settings suggests that this has caused challenges to prisoner mental health (Johnson et al., 2021), this is also reflected in the associated papers in this study (Maycock, 2021; Maycock & Dickson, 2021). Importantly, this scoping review also indicates that existing research in relation to the impacts of Covid-19 in relation to mental health of prisoners is quite limited:

The limited research and poor quality of articles included mean that the findings are not conclusive. However, they suggest a significant adverse impact on the mental health and well-being of those who live and work in prisons. (Johnson et al., 2021, 1)

Very few of these studies cited in this section have used qualitative methods, resulting in narrow and relatively thin insights into the impacts of Covid-19 within prison settings, something the current study tries to address. *The Scottish Prison context*

The prison system in Scotland is distinct and devolved from the system in England and Wales. The Scottish prison estate is composed of 15 prisons located across Scotland, all run as a uniformed service, two of which are privately run. According to the latest Scottish Prison Service (SPS) figures, the prison population in 2017–18 was 7464, which equates to 135 per 100,000 – the second highest imprisonment rate in Western Europe (behind only England and Wales). Penal policy and criminal justice policy more widely have been led by the Scottish Government since devolution in 1999 (Brangan, 2019; Maycock et al., 2018; McNeill, 2016; Morrison, 2016). Some research and analysis has been published about the nature of prison research in Scotland. Qualitative methods and in particular interview methodologies were used in the majority of published studies between 2012 and 2016 (Maycock et al., 2018). This then creates a tension, in so far as qualitative methods have been used extensively within prison research in Scotland, but they are not being used to provide insights into the impacts of Covid-19 within Scottish prisons.

There have been some reports of both cases and deaths due to Covid-19 amongst staff and inmates as well as outbreaks in particular prisons in Scotland.¹ Similar to many other

jurisdictions in response to the Covid-19 pandemic Scottish prisons went into lockdown in March 2020. The lockdown in Scottish prisons resulted in many aspects of prison life being paused at this point, such as prison gyms and education department, multi faith centres being closed and all family visits stopped, although subsequently virtual and some in-person visits have been taking place. Aspects of the lockdown have been eased and reintroduced from March until the time of submission, depending on local factors and issues relating to particular prisons, although many elements of the lockdown introduced in March 2020 have remained.

In summary, the current literature around Covid-19 and prisons focuses in the main around the risks associated with Covid-19 from an interest? in transmission and containment. There is relatively little insight into the lived experience of prisoners or prison staff into Covid-19 within prison settings, and a wider lack of qualitative studies undertaken within prison settings (with the notable exceptions of the Scotland in Lockdown study; <https://scotlandinlockdown.co.uk/>, the Prison Reform Trust CAPPTTIVE project and a small number of emerging and illuminating qualitative studies, including: Gray et al. (2021) and Suhomlinova et al. (2021)). Despite the emerging literature above, there are very few, if no studies, involving face-to-face research with people in custody with a very limited number of studies being administered via correspondence to better understand their experiences of the pandemic, their insights into the pandemic and what social distancing is like within prison. Evidently the Covid-19 lockdown poses a significant challenge for qualitative researchers and mythologies within prison settings. In response to these challenges, methodologically this project utilised letters to enable the concerns and questions that the participants had at the core of the project, research questions were framed by the participants themselves.

Methods and Ethics

While letters in general have been used as data source in historical, sociological and literary research for centuries (Harris, 2002), researchers have only recently started to use letter-writing between a researcher and a research participant as a way to generate self-reflexive data on people's lived experiences (Ahearn, 2001; Kralik et al., 2000; Rautio, 2009). Letter writing is a methodology that has been used in a range of studies to enable research participants to participate in research projects that their circumstances for whatever reason don't allow them to participate in person (Brown, 2014; Davidson & Birmingham, 2001; Davis, 1967; Dunn, 2000; Epston, 2009; Grana et al., 2001; Jiwa & Burr, 2002; Jolly, 2011; Jongbloed-Pereboom et al., 2018; Kelly & Waring, 2018; Kirkhorn & Airth-Kindree, 2010; Muzumdar et al., 2020; Penny & Malpass, 2019; Rancour & Brauer, 2003; Seddon, 2018; Sommer, 1958; Thompson et al., 2017).

The correspondence method is particularly well-suited for exploring sensitive issues and the experiences of stigmatised

individuals and social groups. It has been successfully employed to examine women's experiences of body image (particularly of being overweight) and of infertility and involuntary childlessness (Letherby & Zdrodowski, 1995) and women's experiences of self-harm (Harris, 2002). Correspondence method is better suited than other methods (such as face-to-face interviewing) for collecting the data on the phenomena associated with social stigma and/or intensely personal circumstances, as they allow to circumvent the embarrassment that participants may otherwise experience in describing stigmatised practices or experiences (Harris, 2002, 8). Correspondence method also entails 'the facility for reflection' that renders it 'superior to face-to-face interviewing in terms of accuracy of description' (Harris, 2002, 7).

Within prison settings correspondence methods have been very rarely used (Brown, 2014; Ford & Berg, 2018; Walker et al., 2017), as the normative approach to prison research is through face-to-face methodologies with telephone or email methods used even more infrequently. This is despite letters having a particular meaning and history within prison settings (Bonhoeffer, 2010; Jackson, 1994; Michnik, 1986; Walker et al., 2017). Settings within which other forms of media and communication are often restricted. Correspondence methodologies are currently being used in a study in prisons in England and Wales, *Transcending the bars: Transgender and non-binary prisoners' experiences in England and Wales*, led by Dr. Olga Suhomlinova from the University of Leicester. Within research context shaped by the Covid-19 pandemic, correspondence methods were the only means through which it was possible to engage with a group of people in custody in order for them to share their experiences on the Covid-19 pandemic in prison. This is particularly important given that all face-to-face research was paused across the Scottish prison estate and the independent inspection and monitoring processes were similarly paused. At the time of data collection, within Scotland there were the following restrictions in place:

The Office of the Chief Statistician is now stopping all face-to-face survey fieldwork for the big surveys (Scottish Household Survey, The Crime and Justice Survey and the Scottish Health Survey) and the Office of National Statistic has also stopped all face-to-face survey work. To keep us in line, the Chief Researcher now requests all face-to-face research to also stop immediately.

This created issues for people in custody in relation to equivalence in the participation in research projects on Covid-19 that people in the community can freely participate in, through online survey platforms for example. Critically for the progression of this project at a time of significant operational pressure within the prison estate, the correspondence method of data collection placed no demands on time or resources of operational prison staff, other than the scanning of the letters coming in through the post.

Despite many services being paused (such as education, religious services, prison gyms, prison programmes), post was delivered as normal through the pandemic, so using the postal system was the only means of undertaking research safely, respecting social distancing measures at all times. The participants selected to take part in this study were participants in a pilot participatory action research (PAR) project building on PAR projects developed in prisons in the US (Fine & Torre, 2006; Fine et al., 2004). 13 prisoners signed up to the PAR pilot, and this group got to week 7 of the pilot before lockdown stopped the project so participants were aware of the importance of ethics in research and a range of qualitative research methods. Continuing to engage with this group through this research project has wider benefits for the original pilot when face-to-face research resumes. Of the 13 participants invited to take part in the study, eight gave their informed consent after having been sent the project information sheet and consent form in the post. The participants were all male, serving a long-term sentence,² identified as white and were living in single cell accommodation.

Each of the eight participants have been given pseudonyms to protect their identity and all eight were sent a copy of this paper before submission for publication and given a month to comment or ask any questions about how their correspondence has been analysed, what Lincoln and Guba refer to as 'member checking' (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Postal contact details of the researcher were provided and a commitment to discuss any concerns in relation to any aspect of the paper was given to all participants. At the time of submission, no participants have responded with any concerns about this paper.

While there are recurring concerns about the literacy levels of people in custody (Creese, 2016; Morgan & Kett, 2003; Vacca, 2004), given that the PI for this study knew all the participants from a previous project, these issues were relatively minimal given the relatively high levels of literacy amongst this group of participants. At all times, letters were written in plain English to further enhance the accessibility of the study.

An Overview of the Eight Letters

All letters were sent with a stamped addressed envelope with the name and workplace address of the PI, to enable all participants to respond to any letters without having to pay themselves for an envelope or stamp. All participants were encouraged to write at any time about their experiences of the pandemic and two did this not in response to a letter from the PI.

Consent form and information sheet – eight of the 13 potential participants responded with completed consent forms. (eight responses)

LETTER ONE – general update later with a request for general comments about the covid-19 pandemic in prison. (no responses)

LETTER TWO – Asking the participants what they feel are the important questions or issues relating to Covid-19 in

prison (six responses). This was an important letter that shaped all subsequent correspondence, in asking the participants what they felt were the important questions that were then used in subsequent letters. It is hoped that this study reflects what Brosens (2018) identifies as the participants in this study being involved and influencing this project as opposed to merely participating in it. Responses to letter two form the focus of this paper.

LETTER THREE – Text boxes covering a range of areas derived from suggestions in letter two, including the implications of Covid-19 on communication, life in prison, relationships (five responses)

LETTER FOUR – Reminder asking for responses to letter four (one response)

LETTER FIVE – Comparing Scotland's response to other jurisdictions (using questions from a survey developed by colleagues from Leicester University) (two responses)

LETTER SIX – A letter focussing on what lockdown easing feels like in custody (five responses)

LETTER SEVEN – Reminder asking responses to letter six (no responses)

LETTER EIGHT – Thanking participants for their previous responses and inviting them to write to the PI at any point. (no responses)

Finally, a copy of this paper was sent to all participants asking for feedback and comments (no responses).

In total 19 letters were received constituting a 30% response rate with two additional letters returned that were not direct responses to one of the eight letters above. Two drawings were also received. It is important to note that not all participants responded to all letters, reflecting on the composition of the sample, there are no obvious characteristics that influenced engagement with the study. Given the low response rate, and that this study related to adult men in a long-term prison in Scotland, this study cannot be seen as necessarily representative of all experiences of Covid-19 across different prisons and prisoner groups.

There was divergent response rate to each of the letters and gradual decline in responses as the study progressed. Based on the letters that were received the author feels that this might be a consequence of increasing feelings of isolation and detachment amongst study participants. Earlier in the study participants might have felt that their participation would highlight the challenging situation they faced. However, there was little scope during the time of the study for participants to see any impacts of their participation, and there was no obvious increased awareness about their particular situation during the pandemic. This might have increased feelings of disaffection with this study and potentially involvement in research more widely. The context of participation is important here, as the participants were previously participating in a PAR study, which was paused due to Covid-19 restrictions with no sign of it being resumed at the time of submission. In terms of analysis, all responses were entered into a spreadsheet and then analysed in Nvivo 12 using an inductive thematic analysis (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013).

Emerging Methodological and Ethical Issues

In a number of the later letters, it was evident that letters either outgoing or incoming had gone missing. Two responses to letter eight stated that they had not received letters 4–7, suggesting issues with the delivery of letters during the project. This will have had an impact on the response rate although it is impossible to know the extent of this problem, or the reasons why so many letters went missing. This represents one main limitation of this methodological approach.

In addition to these methodological issues, a number of ethical issues emerged during this study. In particular on receiving a number of letters, it was evident that a number of participants were particularly struggling due to increased isolation and detachment from sources of support, both within prison and through reduced contact to friends and family in the community. There was obviously a lag in the letters going back and forth, and a growing concern about a number of participants that it is difficult to act on and do much about. This is something to be reflected on in future studies using qualitative correspondence methodologies, in terms of the duty of care of participants and the extent to which participants were able to get support for whatever reason if they needed it.

Findings

Findings are clustered around responses to letter two to provide a participant informed research agenda on Covid-19 in prison settings. The project started with a letter asking participants what they felt the important questions were to ask (letter two), these questions and areas of focus were then used to shape the content of subsequent letters. Given that the participants were previously working on a PAR pilot project it was important that participants were able to influence the direction of this project from its initiation and more widely it is hoped that the areas that participants suggested as important will influence other qualitative studies on Covid-19 in prison. Research participants shaping research questions is not an overly common approach and seems relatively rare in criminology, but this does occur in some participatory research projects (Agee, 2009; Baum et al., 2006; Stringer, 2013). Participatory action research projects have been implemented in prison settings where participants have contributed to the design of research questions (Fine & Torre, 2006; Fine et al., 2004; Haverkate et al., 2020; Payne & Bryant, 2018) and this project builds on these approaches. In relation to research questions, Flick suggests:

Reflecting on and reformulating the research questions are central points of reference for assessing the appropriateness of the decisions you take at several points. (Flick, 2018, 105)

In this study enabling participants to shape the research questions that formed the focus of each of the letters has resulted in at times difficult and unexpected questions to be asked throughout letters 3–8. Through engaging with the

participants in the first instance and their suggested questions shaping subsequent correspondence, it is hoped that responses to letter two are able to shape wider research agendas on Covid-19 within prison settings, as the studies focussing on Covid-19 in prison identified above have used with pre-determined questions if they have asked people in custody any questions at all. It is critical that people in custody are able to reflect on their experiences of the Covid-19 pandemic and able to influence associated research agendas, something that has not happened until this project, as without this the evidence base on Covid-19 in prisons will be significantly lacking.

Letter Two

Letter two was the letter at the start of the project through which participants were able to suggest the questions they felt were the important ones to ask. After an introductory text, letter two simply asked the following with a page of A4 for the participants to respond:

Please outline below what questions you think are important to be asking about Covid-19 in prison. Six responses were received to this letter, the highest response rate and the one that gave the respondents to this letter influence over the rest of the six subsequent letters. The areas, questions and wording outlined below as received in these letters were used across the subsequent letters in this study. Responses and questions are clustered into thematic areas of concern that were used as the focus of a number subsequent letters.

Questions about lockdown and lockdown easing. Within the SPS a number of changes to the prison rules were made, in order to reduce the potential spread of Covid-19 in prison. This resulted in people in custody being locked up for most of the day, something that caused concern for a number of participants. Additionally, in the questions below there are a number of unexpected consequences of the Covid-19 lockdown in prison such as the increase in the cost of goods available to buy:

1. Why are prisoners in [name of prison] locked up 22 hours a day when there has been no confirmed cases of Covid-19?
2. How long does the SPS think this lockdown will last?
3. When staff enter the prison are they being tested?
4. Would it be possible for prisoners to get an extra £10 a month from their families to put on the phone or for canteen purchases; the cost of everything on the canteen sheet has gone up due to Covid-19?
5. Have the government bought mobile phones for prisoners to use during the pandemic or is it just lip service to keep prisoners happy?

The last question points to a public announcement made by the SPS Chief Executive and the Cabinet Secretary for Justice about mobile phones being handed out to all people in custody to

enable continued contact with family and friends. The roll out of the phones was delayed but people in all Scottish prisons eventually got a mobile. Within Scotland, a four-phase approach was adopted to easing lockdown (Scottish_Government, 2020) and participants in this study wanted to know what this meant for prison settings:

1. Now that there is a staggered approach outside, can this not start in the SPS system? Is there a plan to move forward on the SPS part?
2. Will the implementation of any plan/strategy mirror the lifting of restrictions on the outside?
3. Does the SPS have an exit plan for prisoners; when can we expect to go back to a normal regime? What has happened with trying to implement a slightly normal routine? How and in what ways has the SPS prepared for the releasing of lockdown restrictions in prisons? When will a normal daily routine be back in place?

The last question suggests an investment in the 'normal' or pre-lockdown regime in prison. The implications of the consistent and repetitive regime in custody has been explored in a number of studies (Crewe et al., 2020; Radzinowicz, 1968; Schinkel, 2015; Sparks et al., 1996). For example, Sparks et al. below outline the importance of routine for participants in their study in two English prisons:

Staff and prisoners in both prisons repeatedly stressed the importance of routines in the prison (cf. also chapter 2), and prisoners placed particular importance on the delivery of regime features which they valued (amongst which gym certainly, and often education, featured prominently). (Sparks et al., 1996, 111)

In more recent research, with male life prisoners Crewe et al. extend insights into ways in which routines in prison can be viewed positively by people in custody:

Rather than experiencing the prison routine as unbearably repetitive, more often they described patterns of behaviour whose predictability made prison life tolerable. (Crewe et al., 2020, 306)

As a consequence of the Covid-19 lockdown these normal routines and rhythms of life in prison were entirely replaced by a new routine almost entirely located within prisoners' cells. Questions around the lockdown and possible delays in easing of lockdown restrictions in prison were reflected in a number of participants. This was within a context of wider concerns about the negative implications of lockdown and changes to a regime that many of the participants in this study had not only adapted to, but now missed. For example, the participant below felt that the lockdown was giving him no hope:

1. I feel we are being given no hope at the moment. No programmes to complete to assist your progression to help to move to the Open Estate. This is tearing families apart.

This is within a context within which hope is possible in prison settings (Liebling et al., 2019), but here we see evidence that the Covid-19 lockdown undermined this. The lockdown in this particular prison wasn't viewed as necessary by some of the participants in this study, given that there had been no reported cases of Covid-19 in this particular prison. There was also a recurring perception that there were unnecessary delays in lockdown restrictions being lifted by the participants in this study, and therefore unnecessary delays in getting back to the pre-lockdown 'normal' regime.

Families, Visits and Connections to the 'Outside' World

The importance of families for people in custody is well established within the prison literature (Codd, 2013; Hutton & Moran, 2019; Jardine, 2019) and this was reflected in responses to letter two with a significant proportion of the suggested questions relating to families:

1. When will prisoners be able to see their families?
Family contact is as important, if not more important to prisoners as it is to the general public. Contact with family members keeps prisoners behaving and the distance has been made greater because of the pandemic.
2. When will visits be back to normal?
3. Why can't we get closed visits; the prison is still allowing lawyers to visit prisoners waiting to go to court?
4. Will the SPS test visitors when the visits start back up and when can we expect a visit?

The sense that the pandemic was creating more distance between participants and their families is perhaps to be expected within the context of a lockdown, with no family visits taking place. However, the implications of this for how the participants felt about being in prison were profound and constitute a new layer of penal power that Crewe (2011) explored in relation to the prisons in England and Wales:

In some respects, then, the prison experience is considerably less heavy than in the past. Power is exercised more softly, in a way that is less authoritarian. Yet in other ways, the prison experience has become 'deeper' and more burdensome. Movements are more restricted, security has been tightened, and risk has become the trump-card of the system. (2011, 524)

To use Crewe's (2011) metaphor, responses to the letters in this project indicate that the Covid-19 has resulted in a 'deepening' and 'tightening' of the experience and feelings associated with imprisonment. In part, this was as a consequence of participants feeling increasingly detached from positive influences on their time in custody such as contact with family and friends outside of the prison, and exercise and other activities with staff and other people in custody within the prison. The Covid-19 lockdown is perhaps unique in its

influence on both life within custody as well as on interactions between those in custody and the community across the entire prison system and not just people in segregation units.

Exercise, Programmes and Connections in the Interior World of Prison

Another aspect of prison life often reported as positive for people in custody are opportunities for exercise and sport (Maycock, 2018; Meek, 2014; Pérez-Moreno et al., 2007), education (Coates, 2016) and various programmes (for example, including those focused on offending behaviour, rehabilitation and substance misuse (Behan, 2014; Hollin & Palmer, 2006; Mahoney et al., 2015; McGuire, 2006; Sapouna et al., 2011)), all of which were paused as a result of the lockdown across the Scottish prison estate. As a consequence, the group of questions below were focused on these areas of out of cell activity:

1. When will night-time exercise start?
2. When can prisoners use the running machines or gym equipment within their halls?
3. Why can't prisoners go to the gym; there has been no confirmed cases of Covid-19 within [name of prison]?
4. Will exercise outside get back to normal an hour a day anytime soon?
5. When will education start back for prisoners?
6. When or how can Programmes restart?
7. How is this going to affect the Programmes Department?
8. I do feel more effort to entertain prisoners could be made. A quiz and videos have been on an info channel run by prison Chaplains along with workout videos. This is a step in the right direction but much more should be done.

Not being able to take part in activities, education or programmes significantly reduced opportunities for interactions with other prisoners and prison staff that for many participants were particularly important. There was a sense that the lack of interaction and face-to-face contact was impacting on prisoner's morale:

1. The lack of face-to-face contact is taking a toll on prisoner's morale.

While this is explored more in responses to letter three below, a number of participants when outlining the questions they felt were important, suggested that the increased feelings of isolation was having significant negative consequences. This including a suicide in custody and increasing feelings of stress within a particularly challenging context:

There has been a rise in mental health issues during the lockdown due to the amount of time spent in isolation. There has even been a

suicide in [name of prison]. Staff are unable to help and health services are at a minimum. The current problems are escalating and could lead to larger issues in the future. Are the 'higher ups' aware of the increase in incidents due to over stressed prisoners?

There is a body of evidence around the negative impacts of segregation in prisons, particular for heightened feelings of isolation within these parts of the prison system (O'Donnell, 2014; Shalev & Edgar, 2015). There is an emerging narrative across the letters received that the Covid-19 lockdown resulted in a kind of system wide segregation, which was felt like a kind of collective punishment and enhanced deprivation of liberty akin to segregation. The question above relates to an important area within prisons relating to health and people in custody accessing healthcare services:

1. When will it be ok to ask for a dental appointment or any healthcare?
2. Prisoners still can't access fresh fruit & veg; when can we hope for this to be sorted out?
3. When can prisoners purchase fruit and veg?

Responses to letter two went further than providing questions and areas for considering for future letters and begin to illuminate the challenging consequences of the Covid-19 lockdown for people living within the Scottish prison estate. In these responses, we begin to get an insight into the ways in which the lockdown deepened the experiences of custody, further distancing participants from positive aspects of the pre-lockdown regime.

Conclusion – To What Extent Can Qualitative Correspondence Methods Influence Research on Covid-19?

This study provides unique insights into the implications of using a correspondence method to gain insights into impacts of Covid-19 in prison settings. The letters received as part of this study challenge prevailing discourses about the successful management of Covid-19 in prison settings and provide insights into the challenges and difficulties that the lockdown has posed for people in custody. This project has shown that qualitative correspondence methods are well suited to situations where face-to-face data collection is not possible, although this method is not without its problems in a context where literacy levels are challenging, and where the impacts of participatory methods can be challenging to realise.

Future research in this area might further analyse the acceptability of correspondence methods to those prison, alongside the analysis of other potential mythologies that might be deployed during times when face-to-face research is not possible. This study has a number of limitations, and principal among these is the nature of the study sample. This study entailed writing letters to eight adult male long-term

prisoners; therefore, the views of short-term prisoners, female prisoners, young offenders and prisoners on remand are not included in this study. These are all groups within the prison system who could be the focus of future studies. Additionally, methodologically there are a number of limitations with this study, largely relating to the small size of the sample, although this was shaped by the ethical approval process. Recommendations coming out of this study are orientated around re-emphasising the importance of people in custody shaping research agendas relating to Covid-19 and other issues within contemporary prison systems. Additionally, it is hoped that the unique insights gained through the correspondence methodology utilised in this study, into Covid-19 will result in other studies also using these methods in a range of settings where direct access to prospective research participants might be challenging or impossible.

In terms of qualitative research on Covid-19 more widely, the responses to letter two shaped later correspondence between the PI and participants, reported elsewhere (Maycock, 2021; Maycock & Dickson, 2021), and it is hoped that the letters that came after letter two were ones that resonated with areas that the participants felt were important. In this sense, we can clearly see the impacts of the participants responses analysed in this paper in relation to the direction of the research project from letter two onwards. However, larger questions emerge about the extent to which qualitative research projects such as this, while illuminating the impacts of Covid-19 in settings such as prisons can influence the direction of prison policy and improve the situation in prison for some of society's most vulnerable and marginalised people. It is hoped that through illuminating what were largely seen as the increased deepening and tightening of feelings associated with a prison sentence, that efforts will be made by prison administrators to ease lockdown restrictions as soon as possible. Ultimately, it is hoped that this study further strengthens the case for the qualitative analysis of the impacts of Covid-19 and not just in prison settings but in all institutional settings.

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Ethical Approval

Following approval by the SPS Research Access and Ethics Committee, this project used a participatory correspondence methodology using the postal service in order to engage with a group of people in custody.

ORCID iD

Matthew Maycock  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3557-3517>

Notes

1. For example, <https://www.dailyrecord.co.uk/news/local-news/almost-100-prisoners-return-positive-23508342> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-56124317> and <https://www.eveningexpress.co.uk/fp/news/local/staff-and-prisoners-hit-in-covid-outbreak-at-hmp-grampian/> <https://www.dailyrecord.co.uk/ayrshire/coronavirus-scotland-more-270-people-23505109>
2. This is a sentence of over 4 years in Scotland.

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